

The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution

Pages 1-12 of 36

1. Introduction

The increased tempo of struggle in our country in the last few years has stimulated a great deal of theoretical debate and political discussion among those in the very front line of the upsurge. Workers in the factories, youth in the townships, mass and underground activists, radical intellectuals, cadres of Umkhonto we Sizwe, militants at all levels are seeking answers to the pressing strategic, tactical and organisational questions of the day. Increasing numbers of our people understand the essence of Lenin's political maxim: **Without revolutionary theory, there can be no real revolutionary movement.**

These discussions and debates keep coming back, in one way or another, to certain fundamentals: class struggle and national struggle, the question of stages of struggle, inter-class alliances, and the role of our working class in the liberation front. Many of these debates are between people who share common starting points; a belief that national domination is linked to capitalism and an acceptance of the goal of a socialist South Africa. But there is not always clarity on the most effective tactical road towards this goal.

A tendency, loosely described as 'workerism', denies that the main content of the immediate conflict is national liberation which it regards as a diversion from the class struggle. Even if it admits the relevance of national domination in the exploitative processes, **'workerism' insists on a perspective of an immediate struggle for socialism.**

A transitional stage of struggle, involving inter-class alliances, is alleged to lead to an abandonment of socialist perspectives and to a surrender of working class leadership. The economic struggles between workers and bosses at the point of production (which inevitably spill over into the broader political arena) is claimed to be the 'class struggle'. This is sometimes coupled with a view that the trade union movement is the main political representative of the working class.

A more sophisticated version of the left-workerist position has recently surfaced among union-linked academics. This version concedes the need for inter-class

alliances but puts forward a view of working class political organisation more appropriate to a trade union than a revolutionary political vanguard.

At the other end of this debate there are views which tend to erect a chinese wall between the struggle for national liberation and social emancipation. **Our struggle is seen as 'bourgeois-democratic' in character so that the immediate agenda should not go beyond the objective of a kind of 'de-raced' capitalism.** According to this view there will be time enough after apartheid is destroyed to then turn our attention to the struggle for socialism. Hence there should be little talk of our ultimate socialist objectives. The working class should not insist on the inclusion of **radical** social measures as part of the immediate agenda because that would risk frightening away potential allies against apartheid.

Topical interest in the political shape and content of post-apartheid society has also brought into focus the question of group rights as opposed, or additional, to individual rights. The racists, of course, exploit 'group rights' and 'multi-nationalism' as a lifeline to their continued domination. But this does not dispose of the question as to whether there is a legitimate basis for a multinational framework in a future people's South Africa.

The existence of cultural and ethnic diversity **side by side** with unifying processes, has aroused friendly queries on our approach to the national question. **Do we believe that our peoples already constitute one nation? If not, are they (or should they be) moving towards single or separate nationhood? What is the future of the cultural and linguistic diversity and how do we cater for this diversity within the framework of a unitary state?**

From some of our left-wing critics comes the charge that our thesis of colonialism of a special type necessarily implies that there are two nations in South Africa — the oppressor (white) and the oppressed (black). A variant of this critique is that the Freedom Charter hints at the existence of four nations when it talks of 'equal status' for 'all national groups and races'.

For South African communists the questions and debates we have mentioned above have not arisen for the first time. For over 66 years we have attempted to find the answers and to apply them in the actual arena of struggle. We do not claim that we have a monopoly of wisdom. But, equipped with the theoretical tool of Marxism-Leninism and the inheritance of an unmatched wealth of revolutionary experience, it is not immodest for us to assert that our Party is uniquely qualified to help illuminate the correct analytical path. This is a process which calls for both creativity and intellectual openness. It also requires a continuing exchange of ideas not only within the ranks of the Party but also between us and all non-Party serious revolutionary activists.

Genuine worries about some of our approaches and formulations (whether from a 'right' or 'left' position) must be debated and not merely dismissed. In this spirit, then, we proceed to consider the following:

- Class struggle and national struggle
- The stages of struggle
- Working class leadership
- The building of the South African nation

We hope that this pamphlet will help expand the discussion of the theoretical basis of our revolutionary practice in the present phase of the struggle.

2. Class Struggle and National Struggle

The South African Communist Party, in its 1984 constitution, declares that its aim is to lead the working class towards the **strategic goal** of establishing a **socialist republic** 'and the more immediate aim of winning the objectives of the **national democratic revolution which is inseparably linked to it**'. The constitution describes the main content of the national democratic revolution as

'...the national liberation of the African people in particular, and the black people in general, the destruction of the economic and political power of the racist ruling class, and the establishment of one united state of people's power in which the working class will be the dominant force and which will **move uninterruptedly towards social emancipation and the total abolition of exploitation of man by man**'.

The national democratic revolution — the present stage of struggle in our country is a revolution of the **whole oppressed people**. This does not mean that the oppressed 'people' can be regarded as a single or homogeneous entity. The main revolutionary camp in the immediate struggle is made up of different classes and strata (overwhelmingly black) which suffer varying forms and degrees of national oppression and economic exploitation. The camp of those who benefit from, and support, national domination is also divided into classes.

Some 'learned theorists' are continuously warning workers against talk of a 'revolution of the whole oppressed people', accusing those who use such formulations of being 'populists' rather than revolutionaries. Let us hear Lenin on this question since he was also in the habit of using the same words to describe the upsurge in Russia:

'Yes, the *people's* revolution. Social Democracy ... demands that this word shall not be used to cover up failure to understand class antagonisms within the people ... **However, it does not divide the "people" into "classes" so that the advanced class becomes locked up within itself ... the advanced class ... should fight with all the**

greater energy and enthusiasm for the cause of the whole people, at the head of the whole people' (*Selected Works*, Volume 1, p.503).

Of course, the long-term interests of the diverse classes and strata of the revolutionary camp do not necessarily coincide. They do not have the same consistency and commitment even to the immediate objectives of the democratic revolution. It is obviously from within the ranks of the black middle and upper strata that the enemy will look for sources of collaboration. We will return to this question.

But, in general, it remains true that our National Democratic Revolution expresses the broad objective interests not only of the working class but also of most of the other classes within the nationally-dominated majority, including the black petit-bourgeoisie and significant strata of the emergent black bourgeoisie. This reality provides the foundation for a struggle which aims to mobilise to its side all the oppressed classes and strata as participants in the national liberation alliance.

We believe that the working class is both an indispensable part and the leading force of such a liberation alliance. But its relations with other classes and strata cannot be conditional on the acceptance by them of socialist aims. The historic programme which has evolved to express the common immediate aspirations of all the classes of the oppressed people is the Freedom Charter. This document is not, in itself, a programme for socialism, even though (as we argue later) it can provide a basis for uninterrupted advance to a socialist future.

The recent surge in workers' organisation and socialist thinking has highlighted some important questions:

- Does the immediate emphasis on the national democratic revolution imply that the working class should abandon **class struggle** in favour of **national struggle**?
- Are socialist objectives being shelved in favour of a struggle for so-called bourgeois democracy?
- Which class must play the vanguard role in our democratic revolution?
- Above all, how can the **independent class role of the working class** be safeguarded in a period demanding inter-class alliances?

The answer to these questions and the key to a correct determination of strategy and tactics in our present situation requires a correct grasp of the **relationship** between **class** and **national** struggle.

If we pose the question by asking only whether our struggle is a national struggle or a class struggle, we will inevitably get a wrong answer. The right question is: what is the **relationship** between these two categories. A failure to understand the **class content of the national struggle and the national content of the class struggle** in

existing conditions can hold back the advance of both the democratic and socialist transformations which we seek.

The immediate primacy of the struggle against race tyranny flows from the concrete realities of our existing situation. The concept of national domination is not a mystification to divert us from class approaches; it infects every level of class exploitation. Indeed, it divides our working class into colour compartments. Therefore, unusual categories such as 'white working class' and 'black working class' are not 'unscientific' but simply describe the facts.

National domination is maintained by a ruling class whose state apparatus protects the economic interests and social privileges of all classes among the white minority. It denies the aspiration of the African people towards a single nationhood and, in its place, attempts to perpetuate tribalism and ethnicity. These, and a host of related practices, are the visible daily manifestations of national domination. These practices affect the status and life of every black in every class. It is, however, the black working class which, in practice, suffers the most intense form of national domination. And those who dismiss the fight against national domination as the key immediate mobilising factor of our working class are living in an unreal world of their own.

It is encouraging to observe the recent spread of an understanding of the link between national domination and class exploitation among organised sectors of the working class. This spread is due primarily to the heightened experiences of the struggle against race domination in the recent period.

Socialist ideas take root not just through book knowledge but through struggle around day-to-day issues. And, for those who have to live the hourly realities and humiliations of race tyranny (at the point of production, in the townships, in the street, etc.) there is no issue more immediate and relevant than the experience of national oppression. This is certainly the starting point of political consciousness for every black worker.

It is mainly in the actual struggle against national oppression that its class roots can be grasped most effectively. It is that struggle which illuminates most brightly the underlying relationship in our country between capitalism and national domination.

Those who would like to restrict the meaning of class struggle to a trade union struggle against the bosses, and who see political struggle only through narrow economic spectacles, would do well to heed Lenin's words on these questions:

'Is it true that, in general, the economic struggle is "the most widely applicable means" of drawing the masses in to political struggle? It is entirely untrue. Any and every manifestation of police tyranny and autocratic outrage, not only in connection with the economic struggle, is not one whit less "widely applicable" as a

means of drawing in the masses ... Of the sum total of cases in which the workers suffer (either on their own account or on account of those closely connected with them) from tyranny, violence and lack of rights, undoubtedly only a small minority represent cases of police tyranny in the trade union struggle as such' (*Selected Works*, Volume 1, p.136).

Class struggle in a period of capitalist hegemony is, in the long run, a political struggle for the ultimate winning of power by the working people. But the content of this class struggle does not remain fixed for all time; it is dictated by the concrete situation at a given historical moment. We cannot confine the meaning of class struggle to those rare moments when the immediate winning of socialist power is on the agenda. When workers engage in the national struggle to destroy race domination they are surely, at the same time, engaging in class struggle.

Class struggle does not fade into the background when workers forge alliances with other class forces on commonly agreed minimum programmes. The history of all struggles consists mainly of such interim phases. What is the essence of conflict during such phases if not class struggle? There is no such thing as 'pure' class struggle and those who seek it can only do so from the isolating comfort of a library arm-chair. The idea that social revolutions involve two neatly-labelled armies was dealt with by Lenin with bitter irony:

'So one army lines up in one place and says "we are for socialism" and another, somewhere else and says, "we are for imperialism", and that will be a social revolution! ... Whoever expects a "pure" social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is'. (*Collected Works*, Volume 22, pp. 355-6).

The workers in Vietnam were not abandoning the class struggle when they concentrated their main energies, in alliance with other class forces, on defeating Japanese militarist occupation, French colonialism, and finally US imperialism and its puppet forces. When Hitler unleashed world war, the main content of the workers' class struggle correctly became the defeat of fascism. This task necessitated the most 'popular' of Fronts which brought together both pro- and anti-socialist forces. It is a matter of historical record that the anti-fascist victory made possible, among other things, the greatest extension of the socialist world since the October Revolution and opened the road to successful anti-imperialist, anti-colonial revolutions.

When we exhort our working class to devote its main energies (in alliance with the other nationally oppressed classes) to the immediate task of winning national liberation, we are certainly not diluting the class struggle or retreating from it. On the contrary, we are advancing and reinforcing it in the only manner which is practicable at the present time.

Nor are we putting off the socialist revolution by an emphasis on the National Democratic objectives of the immediate phase of struggle. In the words of Lenin, answering critics of Bolshevik policy on the primacy of the democratic revolution, 'we are not putting (the socialist revolution) off but are taking the first steps towards it in the only possible way, along with the correct path, namely the path of a democratic republic' (*Selected Works*, Volume 1, p.435). Our immediate emphasis on the struggle for democracy and 'People's Power' is an essential prerequisite for the longer-term advance towards a socialist transformation.

But national liberation is, at the same time, a short-term class imperative for the working people. Because the tyranny of national oppression weighs more heavily on South Africa's doubly- exploited working class than on any other working class, its destruction by the shortest route possible is, in itself, in the deepest class interests of our proletariat. Both immediately and in the long-term, our working class stands to gain more from the ending of national domination than any other class among the oppressed.

These realities help define the main form and content of the workers' class struggle at the present historical moment and the kind of alliances necessary to advance working class objectives. A 'class struggle' which ignores these truths can only be fought out in the lecture-room and not in the actual arena of struggle.

But the need to concentrate on the present does not imply an abandonment or disregard for the future. We shall argue more fully in a later section that participation by the working class in the democratic revolution (involving alliances, minimum programmes, etc.) does not imply a dilution of its independent class positions.

There is, moreover, no need for the spread of socialist awareness among the working people to be postponed during the phase emphasising the democratic transformation a belief falsely attributed to our Party by some of its left-wing critics. During this period it is vital to maintain and deepen working class understanding of the interdependence between national liberation and social emancipation. This task cannot be postponed until the ANC flag flies over Pretoria.

It follows from the above that the participation of our working class and its political vanguard in the liberation alliance is both a long-term and short-term class necessity. The SACP's involvement in such an alliance is not, as our left-wing critics allege, a form of 'tailism' or 'populism'. Nor, as our right-wing detractors would have it, is it an opportunistic ploy to camouflage our so-called 'hidden agenda' and to use the ANC merely as a stepping stone to socialism.

We have never made a secret of our belief that the shortest route to socialism is via a democratic state. But, as already mentioned, the SACP takes part in the alliance

for yet another extremely cogent reason; our belief that the elimination of national domination (which is the prime objective of the Alliance) is, at the same time, the most immediate class concern of our proletariat.

But it is also the concern of the other main classes within the dominated majority. Bearing in mind their class positions, is there an objective basis for a programme which can attract these classes to the side of the liberation front and do so without compromising the fundamental interests of the working class?

The Black Middle Strata and the Emerging Black Bourgeoisie

We have said that the national democratic revolution expresses the broad objective interests of the working class and most of the other classes which make up the nationally-dominated minority. We will return to the special position of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie in the bantustans and in the townships, whose very existence depends upon collaboration with race domination.

Our approach to the multi-class content of the present phase of our struggle has received a great deal of attention from some of our 'left' critics. But because they have distorted our approach by knocking down skittles which they themselves have put up, we need to devote a few words to the obvious.

It is obvious that the black capitalist class favours capitalism and that it will do its best to influence the post-apartheid society in this direction.

It is obvious that the black middle and upper classes who take part in a broad liberation alliance will jostle for hegemony and attempt to represent their interests as the interests of all Africans.

It is obvious that (like their counterparts in every part of the world) the black middle and upper strata, who find themselves on the side of the people's struggle, are often inconsistent and vacillating. They are usually the enemy's softest targets for achieving a reformist, rather than a revolutionary, outcome.

All this is pretty obvious. But it is equally obvious that if the working class and its vanguard and mass organisations were to get locked up with themselves, the greatest harm would be done to the cause of both national liberation and social emancipation. **By rejecting class alliances and going it alone, the working class would in fact be surrendering the leadership of the national struggle to the upper and middle strata.** This would become the shortest route towards a sell-out reformist solution and a purely capitalist post-apartheid South Africa under the hegemony of a bourgeois-dominated black national movement. Along this path, 'class purity' will surely lead to class suicide and 'socialist'-sounding slogans will actually hold back the achievement of socialism.

The black middle and upper strata constitute a relatively significant political force, particularly in community struggles. Whether we like it or not they will participate and, often, take a leading part in such struggles. They are usually among the most vocal articulators of demands and (as we have experienced with black consciousness) they are sometimes the pioneers of new variants of purely nationalist ideology.

The question, therefore, is not whether they are participants in the struggle. The real question is whether the working class, by refusing to establish a common trench, helps push them right into the enemy's lap. On the other hand, by engaging with them on common minimum platforms, the working class is able to forge a stronger opposition and also to neutralise some of the negative potential of the middle class.

It is, in any case, a basic maxim of working class revolutionary strategy that, at every stage, it is necessary to **maximise the forces which can be mobilised against the ruling class around a principled common immediate programme**. But this does not depend just on an appeal to the individual conscience which occasionally (as we have recently witnessed among a small minority of the white community) rebels against its class roots and group interests.

When, however, it comes to the behaviour pattern of class entities, experience has shown that, in general, they are motivated primarily by a desire to protect their economic interests. It follows that to determine which social force can, at a specific moment, be won over to the side of the revolution (without compromising its main objectives) requires, in the first place, an analysis of basic economic factors which will influence their participation. In other words, a shared opposition to race domination at the social level may not, on its own, be sufficient to cement an inter-class alliance.

Is there an objective basis (having its roots in economic class interests) for drawing the black middle and upper classes into an inter-class alliance in the immediate struggle to destroy national domination? We believe that the answer is clearly yes. Let us take note of more recent ruling class activities in this area.

In the last decade the size of the black upper and middle classes has increased. The state has relaxed a few obstacles to class mobility. Some sectors of white business have selectively encouraged black entry into previously forbidden territory. Neither the state nor business have hidden their motivation for these measures. They are designed to create a more significant black social force with a vested interest in the status quo and capitalism; a force which, they hope, will distance itself from the liberation struggle or, perhaps, even take it over.

Despite the 'reforms' and peripheral concessions of the last decade, **the immediate fate of the black middle and upper classes remains linked much more with that of the black working people than with their equivalents across the colour line.** For reasons of colour their class mobility cannot proceed beyond a certain point. They are still hemmed in by national disabilities economic, cultural, social and political which separate them from their white class counterparts.

At the economic level, reforms notwithstanding, national oppression continues to affect black capitalists in the accumulation process. With some exceptions, they cannot own land or property in the central business districts. They are disadvantaged when it comes to access to credit and loan capital, etc. And, at the social and cultural levels, a black capitalist continues to share with a black worker most of the humiliations of inferior colour status.

A few black capitalists may now be able to rub shoulders with tycoons like Oppenheimer at some board-room meetings as a symbol of 'black advancement', but they cannot leave their ghettos to live next door to their fellow directors, sit in a common parliament, assert a right for their immediate family from rural areas to resettle in their home towns, and so on. It is only the most vulgar and deterministic forms of economism which can underplay the impact of these, and so many other, ravages of national domination which do not exempt a single class or group within the black community.

But, as we have already argued, ultimately it is the economic factor which plays the primary role in determining class alignments. Conflicting class approaches to the nature of the immediate post-apartheid society may well, in practice, overshadow existing economic discrimination and the common black aversion to white rule. A Motsuenyane is more likely to opt for remaining a capitalist in a race-dominated society if the alternative is that he will become a worker in a people's South Africa. In addition, therefore, to the social impact of race practices which variously affect all black classes and strata, is there an objective **economic foundation** for an inter-class black alliance?

There **is** such an objective foundation. It is grounded in a perspective of an interim phase in the post-apartheid period which neither threatens the **immediate** economic aspirations of the **other nationally-dominated classes nor militates against the fundamental interests of the workers.** This perspective is not (as our 'left' detractors allege) tailored merely to suck broad elements into the liberation front.[1]

Nor does it, in any way, constitute a retreat from a commitment to end all forms of exploitation of man by man.

We have never hidden our conviction, which we continue to proclaim, that true national liberation is ultimately impossible without social liberation. The Freedom Charter and our Party Programme do not, however, project socialism as the immediate consequence of a people's victory. During this phase a vital role, under specified conditions, will undoubtedly be required of a private sector.[2]

Even where the socialist transformation is directly on the agenda, the role of the private sector cannot be dismissed. Leaving aside the lunatic excesses of Pol Pot's Kampuchea, many hard lessons in this area have been learnt by some of the established socialist states and, more recently, by African parties dedicated to a socialist advance. The transition period to socialism may well demand a maintenance of selective parts of the private sector. A mechanical and generalised elimination of this sector for the sake of satisfying sloganised orthodoxy, has often served to undermine the faith of the working people in the capacity of socialism to 'deliver the goods'.

We will come back to the need for immediate steps to be taken in the post-apartheid period to break the economic stranglehold of the monopolies and to transform a major portion of wealth from private into social property. Suffice it to say that **such measures will, of necessity, result in an immediate sizeable contraction of the private sector.** Ninety nine per cent of this sector is presently owned and controlled by white capitalists; a race monopoly which constitutes the key instrument of national domination.

At the same time it would be harmful demagoguery and a recipe for chaos to proclaim that the post-apartheid state will be able, at a stroke, to do away completely with the market economy, to eliminate the whole private sector and to dispense with the accumulated business experiences and management skills of this sector. With the lifting of the race barriers, those black businessmen who have been the victims of race-stunted growth, will certainly find more immediate room for expansion than they were ever permitted under apartheid rule. The anti-monopoly provisions of the Freedom Charter will also open up avenues for the relative growth of black business in the post-apartheid phase.

In other words, under a people's government the black middle and upper classes will be better off economically (and in every other aspect of their lives) than they are now. In this sense the national democratic revolution represents their immediate interests as a class; it provides a legitimate and principled basis for the kind of inter-class alliance which is projected by our liberation front.[3]

Those who fear that all this amounts to the expansion of capitalism in the post-colonial state would do well to remember that we are talking about a minute group (the black middle and upper strata) which just about produces two per cent of the gross national product, mainly in the tertiary sector. In any case, the expansion of

its growth as a result of the lifting of racial barriers in trade and manufacture will, in terms of the Freedom Charter, be controlled 'to assist the well-being of the people'.

In the context of a severe clipping of the wings of the overwhelming mass of existing private capital, it is sheer ultra- leftist demagoguery to describe this approach as a commitment to a capitalist road in the state.[4] It cannot be denied that a private sector of whatever size will inevitably help to generate negative social and ideological tendencies. But social control over the main means of production and distribution by a political power in which the working class is dominant should more than counter- balance such tendencies.

What we have said about the black middle and upper classes does not apply to all its segments. We have always been careful to treat the emergent black **bureaucratic bourgeoisie** as a special category even though there is a degree of interchangeability between it and other strata.

The **bureaucratic bourgeoisie** is a stratum that depends for its capital accumulation more or less entirely on its position within the collaborative structures of apartheid bantustan 'governments', community councils, management committees, etc. It enriches itself often through fraud and corruption, and uses access to the collaborative structures to allocate to itself land, trading premises and other resources. Its genesis and demise depend solely on the survival of race domination and (individual defections aside) it will share a trench with the enemy.

The allegiance of the other middle and upper black strata to the immediate objectives of the liberation struggle cannot be taken for granted; it has to be fought for on the ground. The ruling class can be expected to contend with the liberation alliance for the political soul of these strata, exploiting their class potential for vacillation and their preference for reformist, rather than revolutionary, transformation.

The alliance of the working class with forces which reject its long-term socialist aspirations is never unproblematic and without tension. It requires constant vigilance and, above all, the safeguarding of the independence of the vanguard and mass class organs of the workers. The question of the inter-class alliance brings us to a related issue — the so-called two-stage theory of the South African revolution.

Course: National Democratic Revolution

12091a, Slovo, SA Working Class and the NDR, 1988, Part 1 of 3

5253 words